Watergate Helps Kennedy in

7/6/73

By Jules Witcover
Washington Post Staff Writer

DECATUR, Ala., July 5—The re-emergence of Richard Nixon in his pre-presidential role as the prime unifier of Democrats is a major political ramification of Watergate.

Nowhere has this fact been more dramatically demonstrated than in Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's July 4

News Analysis

speech here before Gov. George C. Wallace and his Alabama faithful.

In what was to be a nonpolitical forum, Kennedy yesterday made his main appeal to the assembled Democrats by lashing out at the President and his administration, accusing them of taking " . . . radical steps toward dismembering the spirit of our revolution and the protections of the Constitution."

In the process, Kennedy deftly appropriated the central themes of Wallaceism—law-and-order, fear of and antagonism toward big central government, corporate greed and exploitation of the little man—and laid abuses in these areas at Mr. Nixon's feet.

Kennedy's decision to go after Mr. Nixon in this forum, and in a part of the country that overwhelmingly voted for him over Sen. George McGovern last fall, seemed risky at first blush. But the positive reaction of the crowd indicated that he had read the local pulse correctly.

In preparation for Kennedy's Alabama visit, Richard Goodwin, the old Kennedy-McCarthy-Kennedy-Muskie-Kennedy speechwriter, had gone to the state, and his soundings on the political climate were reflected in the draft of the speech he wrote.

This is not to say that, if the voters of Alabama were again confronted today with a choice between Mr. Nixon and McGovern, they would vote any differently. All conversations one has in the state suggest just the opposite—that antipathy to McGovern remains great.

But it does suggest that given a viable alternative, the Nixon sweep of Dixie can be reversed in 1976—with a strong impetus from Watergate and a candidate who knows how to use it.

That candidate may not be Kennedy, whose family has been regarded with skepticism in much of the South. But in this visit at least, he was cordially greeted and treated.

United Press International

Well-wishers greet Sen. Kennedy arriving at ceremonies for Gov. Wallace in Decatur.

Equally important in any Democratic exploitation of Watergate, of course, will be the ability of the party nominee to ease the fears of the Deep South about Northern liberalism and all it has come to represent to Southern ears—radicalism, social experimentation favoring blacks at the expense of whites, a permissiveness toward lawbreakers.

In the past, a few Democratic politicians—most notably Robert Kennedy in 1968—have demonstrated in the North an ability to forge a coalition of white blue-collar workers and blacks, partly through personal magnetism, partly by convincing each group that an economic community of interest exists between them. Robert Kennedy achieved this most effectively in the Indiana primary of 1968.

McGovern last year tried to do the same thing, with some modest success in his early primary showings in Pennsylvania and Ohio. But perception of him as a changeable radical more than offset what he was able to achieve in this regard.

Now comes Ted Kennedy, the obvious heir to the black-blue collar constituency of his brother, seizing the Watergate vulnerability of Mr. Nixon to pull Democrats together, and at the same time saying things to ease the concern of the Southern brethern about the direction of the party.

As an example of sheer political base-touching, Kennedy's Decatur speech could be a textbook model. In addition to strumming the old anti-Nixon chords, it played to standard conservative dogma about the inviolability of the Constitution and the threat of any public official becoming too powerful. And for the Wallace populist strain, there were all the right words about big government and big corporations misleading and manipulating the private citizen-consumer.

"Highest interest rates," he said, "do not damage the banks which collect them nor disturb the wealthy who deduct them. But they damage every consumer who must make higher payments for his house, his car, and television set." George himself could not have said it better.

The ready conclusion from Kennedy's Alabama visit and speech, is that he already has embarked on a quest for the 1976 Democratic presidential nomination as a man who is able to capitalize on Watergate and reunify the party.

To such suggestions, he takes the standard line that it is much too early to en-

Dixie

gage in such speculation, that he has not decided what he will do, and that when the time comes he will have something to say.

That time, he has also indicated, will not be until sometime after the 1974 congressional elections. That is also standard, and there is no reason to seriously doubt that Kennedy is simply doing what he always has done —keeping his options open, in that tired but applicable cliche.

If he were just any politician, there could be little doubt that at this stage in his career—41 years old, 10 years in the Senate, with the opposition party mired in scandal—that he would be running, and hard.

But the special circumstances involved for Kennedy—the assassination of his two brothers in public life, he added personal and family pressures that awful history put upon him, and the attendant security problem—inject uncertainty that can't be dismissed out of hand.

During the Alabama visit, security was not a problem. The reception for Kennedy was warm and open. He was not mobbed as he often is in the North, but he was more than just respectfully received. For his part, he walked easily through the crowd shaking hands and waving.

A political campaign, however, imposes a different climate, in which the candidate is a seeker of power. Campaigns generate different types of crowds and individual emotions. Moreover, the lingering attitudes about the Chappaquiddick tragedy must be considered.

Strictly in terms of professional politics, though, the Kennedy Alabama visit was an exercise in party fence-mending, in demonstrating personal appeal and in reminding the faithful who the political enemy is. As Democrats around the country engage increasingly in 1976 candidate speculation, it is likely that this Kennedy venture into Dixie, into the state of George Wallace, will become a reference point on what can be done in 1976 by the right Democrat saying the right things.